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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 003712

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: JANG GROUP'S BEHAVIOR MAKES WORKING WITH GEO TV UNTENABLE

[1](#)1. This is an action request see paragraph 15.

[1](#)2. Summary: Post believes the time has come to end the contract the BBG holds with "GEO TV Network" and move it to a responsible organization. GEO is owned by the "Jang Group," a multimedia corporation owning Urdu and English language newspapers and magazines and Urdu television stations in all major media markets in Pakistan, with cable TV contracts in the United States and elsewhere. While claiming to be moderate and neutral to USG policies, the "Jang Group" recently has increased its criticism of the USG and its policies, has engaged in anti-Semitic behavior and has specifically targeted the Ahmadi religious minority group in a television program that resulted in the death of two (including one Amcit) Ahmadis.

[1](#)3. We have evidence the Jang Group is consciously publishing and broadcasting false and inflammatory stories, without regard to the fact that they could encourage violence against Americans or against U.S. interests. It is purposefully using the reach of its television network to amplify unchecked hate speech and promote violence in a brazen attempt to uphold or even increase its market share in a down economy. Post requests that the BBG cancel its contract to disseminate VOA programming through GEO. [End summary]

[1](#)4. The "Jang Group" is a multimedia corporation owning Urdu and English language newspapers, magazines, and television stations in all major media markets in Pakistan with a country-wide reach. Founded at the end of the Second World War by Mir Khalil ur Rehman. The company consists of three groups: Independent Newspapers Corporation (Pvt) Limited, News Publications (Pvt) Limited, and Independent Media Corporation (Pvt) Limited.

[1](#)5. The Group Chairman and Executive Director is Mir Javed ur Rehman, the eldest son of founder Mir Khalil ur Rehman. The Group Chief Executive and Editor in Chief is his younger brother, Mir Shakil ur Rehman. The Group Editor is Mehmood Shaam (Karachi).

[1](#)6. The Independent Newspapers Corporation (Pvt) Limited owns the daily Urdu language "Jang" with editions issued in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Quetta, Multan, and London. It has a combined estimated circulation of 300,000 plus (the largest in the country). Other papers owned by group include the Urdu daily "Awaz" (Lahore), evening Urdu daily "Awam" (Karachi), evening Urdu daily "Inqilaab" (Lahore), Urdu weekly "Akhbar-e-Jehan" (Karachi), English weekly "MAG" (Karachi), and the website www.jang.com.pk.

[1](#)7. News Publications (Pvt) Limited owns the English daily "The News," with editions issued in Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore. Its combined daily estimated circulation is 50,000.

[1](#)8. Independent Media Corporation (Pvt) Limited owns Urdu language "GEO TV Network." The satellite TV channel is headquartered in

Dubai, UAE, with studios and offices in Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore. "GEO TV Network" started in 2002 with its flagship "GEO TV," later branching into two channels "GEO News" and "GEO Entertainment" (dramas, sitcoms, etc.). It has subsequently launched "GEO Super" (24-hour sports), "Aag" (24-hour music) and international editions including GEO UK, GEO USA, GEO Middle East, GEO Canada, GEO Europe, and GEO Japan. The Chief Executive is Mir Ibrahim Rehman (based in Karachi), the son of Mir Shakil ur Rehman and the President is Imran Aslam (Karachi).

19. Post has watched with growing concern, as "Jang Group" media entities have grown more irresponsible running erroneous and clearly unsubstantiated stories against not only USG policies and the Embassy, but also a minority religious group in Pakistan, as well as espousing anti-Semitic rhetoric. While initially this could be seen as a flexing of new found media freedoms allowed under former President Musharraf -- and continued under newly-elected President Zardari -- we now believe these stories are intentional and put our people at risk. The Group's outlets have frequently been the only media outlets in Pakistan to run, without modification or qualification, releases put out by the Taliban.

Among the more egregious acts:

-- On August 27, 2008, Jang Group papers ran a story claiming all USAID offices in the FATA had closed due to a threat from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Not only was the story a fabrication, but it also made baseless inflammatory accusations claiming Blackwater USA was handling security and identifying an American Peshawar Consulate employee as a Jew, stating that as a Jew he should close down his offices there, "since the presence of Jewish

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officials in FATA would not be tolerated in any case."

-- On September 7, 2008, "GEO TV Network" aired the program "Aalim Online." The date coincided with the anniversary of a change in Pakistan's constitution in 1974 that officially classified the Ahmadis as "non-Muslims." The host Dr. Aamir Liaquat Hussain egged on guests about the Ahmadis. One guest responded that, "As long as this sedition is alive and even one (Ahmadi) remains on this earth, there is a need to eliminate it." Two other guests used the Arabic phrase "Wajib-ul-Qatal (duty to kill) to describe those who believe in the Ahmadi doctrine. Dr. Hussain did not intervene to moderate the views, and in his closing statement belittled the Ahmadi founder and agreed in essence with the guests' contention that his followers were not true Muslims. No member of the Ahmadi community was invited to speak. Two prominent Ahmadi leaders, one of them an American citizen, were murdered in Pakistan shortly after the program was televised.

-- After the September 20, 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing, English language paper "The News" ran a series of baseless pieces attempting to blame the bombing on the U.S., claiming that Post had been using the hotel as a base of operations for "hundreds" of "Marines," carrying on about steel boxes that had been moved in and out of the hotel under cover of night. When those stories petered out, it claimed that the fire that raged throughout the night of the bombing, was started by chemicals in the guest room of the one of the Americans who died in the blast. None of this was ever substantiated in any way, yet ran on the front page of the paper and was echoed by "GEO TV." Few of these stories were picked up by any of the other media, and completely ignored by the international press here.

-- On October 23, 2008, Post's Information Officer received a call at 2200 on the mobile telephone he reserves for press calls from someone who would not identify himself, but claimed that he had just driven by the IO's residence, saw there were cars there, and asked if he had not been invited to a reception. The individual then asked about a resolution that had recently been passed by the Pakistani parliament, and then asked to speak to the Ambassador. The IO was then asked about a "Daniel Pearl Lecture" he had heard the IO conducted in Karachi earlier in the week, and then inquired if the IO was Jewish. The subsequent story in "The News" took the IO's comments out of context in a clear effort to paint a derogatory

picture.

-- On November 17, 2008, "GEO TV" suddenly disappeared from the airwaves in Karachi. The blackout lasted about six hours. A senior "GEO" staffer told our senior information LES that the stoppage was a result of pressure being applied by one of the political parties due to "GEO" not airing a speech by one of its politicians. Post found out subsequently that another "GEO" official disclosed to an officer of a European diplomatic mission that they had taken themselves off the air in order to blame the political party, and garner support for the station.

¶10. We have protested directly to reporters, editors, and the Group Chief Executive and Editor in Chief Mir Shakil ur Rehman over the consistent inaccuracy of "Jang Group" reporting, as well as their refusal to apply the most basic standards of journalistic ethics, stating that we expect to be called about and to respond to any story any entity of the group is carrying about the Embassy or its activities, and even provided them with direct telephone numbers for the IO, the PAO, and the Ambassador. Despite these efforts, the "Jang Group" has not changed its practices.

¶11. All of this occurs under the eye of the Group Editor who has not exercised supervision or applied good journalistic practices when assigning and reviewing stories. When queried by Post's IO he stated that they know that many of their reporters have political agendas, are paid by ISI, military intelligence, Jamaat-e-Islami, or other interests but that they prefer not to fire or reprimand these reporters.

¶12. The problem of reporting rumor, innuendo, and unsubstantiated allegations is bad enough when limited to the distribution numbers of "Jang" daily or "The News." However, it is when these stories are amplified by the "GEO TV Network" that the truly negative influence expands to substantial numbers. And all of this by their own admission is calculated to maintain or increase their market share.

¶13. On a recent visit to "GEO TV Network" offices in Karachi, our IO had a conversation putting all of this into context. "GEO" sees

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its behavior as win-win with sensationalism and hate speech generating ratings and any attempt by authorities to rein it in allowing them to exploit their circumstance by claiming censorship. While they realize that we (like the GOP, Brits, Canadians and many of the international reporters) find their reporting reprehensible and dangerous, we have supported them in the past, especially when President Musharraf took "GEO TV" off the air during the 2007 State of Emergency, and believe we dare not stop them lest we be seen as hypocrites. Their calculus is that we are more cowed by accusations of actively trampling their freedom of the press than we are of tacitly supporting hate speech. Therein lies the rub for the USG -- at what point do we cater to consistent, blatant hate speech and intentionally inaccurate and irresponsible reporting in major daily newspapers and a country's largest broadcaster which threatens the safety of American citizens or U.S. interests?

¶14. We have discussed the issue with the GOP at different levels, including President Zardari, and all are concerned by the "Jang Group's" coverage. While wishing to grant the benefit of the doubt in order to protect the right to a free press, we believe the utter lack of any journalistic standard or editorial restraint has now proven too much to overlook.

¶15. Action Request: In light of this calculated behavior, post believes it is time to terminate the BBG contract to disseminate VOA programming through the "Geo TV Network." Post recommends finding a more balanced and responsible partner with whom to deal for our media program contracts in Pakistan.